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Mad cow militancy: Neoliberal hegemony and social resistance in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: South Korea Candlelight protests Neoliberalism Hegemony Geography of social movements	Massive protests shook South Korea through the summer of 2008. This political eruption which exhibited many novel and unexpected elements cannot be explained by pointing to basic political conditions in South Korea (strong labor unions, democratization, and so forth). Neither does the putative reason for them — to protest the new President's decision to reopen South Korea's beef market to the U.S. — adequately explain the social dynamics at play. In this paper, we examine the political geography of the 'candlelight protests' (as they came to be known), focusing in particular on their novel aspects: the subjectivities of the protesters, fierce ideological struggles, and differentiated geography. We argue that the deepening of neoliberal restructuring by the new conservative regime formed the underlying causes of these intense conflicts. In other words, the new protests should be seen as a response to the reinforced contradictions engendered by neoliberalization and a new alignment of social groups against the prevailing hegemonic conditions in South Korea. In this view, the huge demonstrations revealed vulnerabilities in conservative hegemony but failed to produce a different hegemony. To advance these claims, we examine three aspects of the protests: first, the neoliberal policies of the new conservative regime; second, the intense ideological conflicts around the media; and finally, the spatial materialization of the protests.
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Introduction criticisms of the reopening of the beef market surged onto the

Between May and August 2008, South Korea was rocked by a series of unprecedented protests. Hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets of Seoul and other major cities carrying the symbol of resistance—a modest candle (see Fig. 1). These so-called ‘candlelight protests’ were launched without any formal statement or defined leadership, yet they briefly transformed South Korea (hereafter Korea).

What caused these protests? The standard explanation – with which we agree, in part – points to the President's decision to reopen Korea's market to U.S. beef imports. After the discovery of mad cow disease in Washington State on 23 December 2003, Korea announced an import ban on American beef. Then on 18 April 2008, new President Lee Myung-bak reversed this decision and re-opened the Korean beef market to the U.S. to facilitate the approval of the Korea–US Free Trade Agreement (or KORUS FTA) and restore relations between Korea and the U.S.¹ (Whereas the previous liberal government had opened the market to U.S. beef, it did so with numerous restrictions about cattle age and parts; President Lee removed these restrictions.) But after a television station ran a program on the threat of mad cow disease in U.S. beef on April 29,

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What caused these protests? The standard explanation – with criticisms of the reopening of the beef market surged onto the national stage. On May 2, an on-line club held a candlelight protest in Cheonggye Square in the center of Seoul; most of the protesters were teenage students. Further demonstrations followed, with almost daily protests for more than three months. Hong (2009) explains that the candlelight demonstration is a distinct form of gathering caused by the draconian stipulation of the Law on Assembly and Demonstration that prohibits open-air gatherings after sunset, but does allow ‘cultural activities’. Thus, the candlelight demonstration in Korea is also called ‘candlelight cultural festival’.

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The rapid intensification of these protests surprised many, as did the emergence of new aspects and practices of mass struggle. Even if these candlelight demonstrations were not the first, they differed substantially from previous ones in Korea. We aim to explain how and why this new type of social resistance evolved. We reject at the outset the notion that a single political decision – the opening of Korea's beef market to U.S. imports – can account, in a simple or direct way, for these massive and novel forms of resistance. We must go beyond the immediate emphasis on beef and food safety to examine the underlying sources of conflict.² We argue that the stage was set for the anti-beef import demonstrations by a new round of policy changes brought in by the new conservative government. These policy changes reflect a deepening of Korea's neoliberal turn which started in the 1980s, and have promulgated a limited and partial hegemony—the limits of which were clarified in 2008.

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Fig. 1. Candlelight protests in the summer of 2008. Source: Nam, S. Y. (<http://www.ohmynews.com>).

Nevertheless, we do not claim that the protesters viewed their protests as ‘mobilizations against neoliberalism’.³ Most did not. Nor do we claim that the participants perceived these protests as struggles against neoliberal transformation per se. Rather, we argue that although the protesters did not cast their protests in ‘anti-neoliberal’ terms, the substance of their arguments can be read as opposition to neoliberalism or, more fundamentally, to the disruption of their lives by the deepening of capitalist social relations. Because the protests addressed food safety, some Korean intellectuals found in them the emergence of a new “life politics” (Hong, 2008; H.K. Kim, 2008; Yang, 2008). This approach attributes the extensive participation of women in the protest to ‘life politics’. Though we do not reject this argument, we suggest that the emphasis on beef must be interpreted in light of the socio-economic changes brought by the conservative regime.

In proposing to interpret the beef protests in this way, we aim to draw out the key connections between the well-documented changes in Korean political economy on one hand, and the political–geographical qualities of these unexpected protests on the other. On this basis, we argue that the protests of May–August 2008 reveal both a deepening of neoliberalization by the conservative regime as well as a deepening of resistance to neoliberalism among many Koreans. More narrowly, we contend that the 2008 protests should be interpreted as a response to the contradictions engendered by neoliberalism and a new alignment of social groups against present hegemonic conditions in Korea. This approach allows us to explain the novelty of certain socio-spatial practices and to investigate the limits of this new social resistance. Specifically, we examine three aspects of the protests in this paper: (1) their framing of neoliberal policies of the new conservative regime; (2) fierce ideological struggles around the media; and (3) the spatial manifestations of these conflicts. While the first point is linked to the cause of this protest, the latter two examine the nature of the

demonstrations as such. To begin, we turn to the literature on Korea’s experience with neoliberalism to contextualize the policies at the heart of the protests.

The neoliberal Korean state

There has been a vast amount of research on neoliberalism in political geography in recent years (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007). Here, we focus on the discussions in political geography of the neoliberal state. Neoliberalism is often understood as the reduction of state function and power (Friedman, 2002), but this is an oversimplification. As Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell explain, “rolling back the frontiers of the state” does not mean rolling back the state *in general* but rather rolling back (and restructuring) a *particular kind of state* (Peck & Tickell, 2007: 28–29). They argue:

Only rhetorically does neoliberalism mean ‘less state’; in reality, it entails a thoroughgoing reorganization of governmental systems and state-economy relations. Tendentially, and more and more evidently as neoliberalism has been extended and deepened, this program involves the roll-out of new state forms, new modes of regulation, new regime of governance, with the aim of consolidating and managing both marketization and its consequences (2007: 33).

Neoliberal restructuring is invariably a destructively creative process, the dismantling of Keynesian state and social institutions accompanied by the roll-out of new institutional and discursive practices.

In his analysis of the contradictions between neoliberal theory and practice, Harvey outlines four features of the neoliberal state in practice (2005: 79–81): (1) the neoliberal state is “activist in creating a good business climate and to behave as a competitive

entity in global politics”; (2) the neoliberal state often depends on authoritarianism by using coercive legislation and policing in market enforcement; (3) the neoliberal state regulates finance to reduce chronic financial instability; and (4) the neoliberal state reconstructs social solidarity in order to ease the social anomie caused by neoliberal reform. These features clarify neoliberalization as a project to achieve the restoration of class power and to intensify exploitation of the dominated classes.

Harvey's analysis of neoliberalism as a class-driven strategy fits Korea well. After the financial crisis in late 1997, Korea experienced a more aggressive form of neoliberalization. Some legal and political scholars utilize the term 'neoliberal police state' (Kim, 2007; K.S. Lee, 2001; W.W. Lee, 2001) to describe the more authoritarian nature of the Korean state; they find the origins of a police state in the intrinsic attributes of neoliberalism. While these scholars generally agree that a neoliberal police state in Korea emerged during the liberal regimes (1998–2008), a new and intense discussion about the neoliberal police state has arisen under Lee's regime. Indeed, a harsher form of the police state appeared during the beef protests in the first year of Lee regime. Violent oppression of basic rights like freedom of association or the right to strike is occurring through the revision of existing legal framework or the establishment of new institutional mechanisms (B.G. Kim, 2009; Lee, 2009). A *Sisain* article of 15 June 2009, even posed the question, “Will we call the Lee government ‘fascist?’”

It is undeniable that state practices are more authoritarian today than during the early 2000s. As is well known, between the 1960s and 1980s Korea's state was authoritarian and ‘developmental’ – the result of an accumulation strategy (Poulantzas, 1978) that conjoined capital, state, and labor in a virtuous cycle that facilitated rapid industrial growth. A growing literature has examined the transformation and afterlife of the developmental state in the context of what can only be described as the ‘neoliberalization’ of Korean political economy (Chang, 2006; Cumings, 1999; Hart-Landsberg & Burkett, 2001; Pirie, 2008). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate, we contend that the authoritarianism cannot be seen as unique to the developmental state. After all, coercive measures are being used to deepen neoliberal policies. By this interpretation, the current configuration in Korea confirms Harvey's analysis of neoliberal state (2005). At the same time, we should be careful not to simply identify the Korean state with Western neoliberal one. The Korean developmental state has not been perfectly transformed into a neoliberal one, and the legacies of the developmental era have not completely disappeared. Rather, in sum, we claim that the authoritarian legacy of Korea's developmental state has crystallized in a state that is coordinating an essentially neoliberal accumulation strategy (see Doucette, 2010 for a similar interpretation).

While neoliberal restructuring in Korea in the 1990s centered on labor markets and finance (Pirie, 2008), in recent years neoliberalization has penetrated the health, water, education, agriculture and, most recently, carbon (MER, 2008). President Lee Myung-bak has promoted a host of aggressive neoliberal policies: privatization of public services such as health insurance and water service, educational reform to enhance competition and English communication skills, and the construction of a ‘Grand Canal’ through South Korea. Moreover, the Lee regime has furthered the liberalization of trade policy by attempting to conclude free-trade negotiations with Europe and the USA. In addition, Lee's Grand National Party passed a tax reduction bill to include income tax, inheritance tax, corporation tax, donation tax and property tax—all reforms that disproportionately favor the rich. In sum, the re-emergence of a conservative government has led to the intensification of neoliberal economic policies. While not all of these policies have been successfully brought into force, taken together they comprise a new capitalist accumulation project in Korea (Kang, 2008: 71).

While we agree that the origin of the protests lies in the critique of neoliberalism within the Korean left (Kang, 2008; K.I. Kim, 2009; S.I. Park, 2008), we note that the protests focused in substance on the effects of these policies on people's daily lives and the reinforced police state under the Lee regime. In other words, the candlelight demonstrations were brought about largely by economic issues, but developed into socio-political resistance around issues typically seen as ‘non-economic’. To appreciate this dynamic, we turn to consider the ideological struggles revealed through the candlelight protests.

Ideological struggles: the role of the media

One of the unexpected twists in the beef-protest story is the central position of communication technologies in facilitating rapid and dynamic forms of social and spatial resistance. Indeed, the media played key roles in the protests at two levels: first, by both facilitating and debilitating the struggles; second, by becoming one of the main objects of protest.

In Korea, newspapers are a central source of information and consequently play a major role in shaping public opinion. The three major conservative newspapers – Chosun, Donga and Joongang – are owned by a relatively small group of elite families (see Table 1). After the beef issue became a topic of widespread debate, these three newspapers each ran a series of articles to examine the background to the protests. Not surprisingly, the tone of their articles and editorials minimized the gravity of the issue. In early May 2008, as the U.S. beef import issue was gaining traction, these newspapers attributed popular alarm to a “spooky story about mad cow disease” disseminated through politically-biased media and entertainers who had unfairly criticized the government in their blogs (Chosun (2008, May 2); Munhwa (2008, May 2); Chosun (2008, May 4)). They explained the protests by reference to behind-the-scenes, left-leaning, anti-American organizers. They even depicted the Korean Teachers & Education Workers' Union (KTU) as a group determined to organize teenagers (Donga (2008, May 4); Chosun (2008, May 8)).

Yet as the protests grew and public opinion turned against the state's new policies, these newspapers changed their tone and criticized both the government's insufficient response to the protests and the ostensibly unscientific rumors that started them (Joongang (2008, May 17); Chosun (2008, May 22)). They singled out the April 29 media program on U.S. beef, “MBC PD Note”, as the principal offender.⁴ When the protest evolved into street marches

Table 1
The main newspapers in Korea.

	Year of foundation	Ownership ^a	Editorship ^a	Market share (%) ^b
Chosun	1920	Family (Bang)	The appointment of the owner	25.6
Joongang	1965	Family (Hong) and Chaebol (CJ)	The appointment of the owner	19.7
Donga	1920	Family (Kim)	Direct election and approval of appointment	14.3
Hankyoreh	1988	People's stockholder system	Direct election and approval of appointment	3.8
Kyunghyang	1946	Employees' stockholder system	Direct election and approval of appointment	5.8

^a Kim, K. W. (2008). The impact of media ownership and editorship on news reporting: focusing on the Samsung X-file case by combining content and frame analysis. Ph.D. Dissertation, Kyunggi University.

^b Korea Press Foundation. (2008). 2008 Survey of media recipients' opinion. Seoul: Communication Books.

and the first calls for impeachment were sounded, they shifted to a critique of the violence and illegality in the protests, emphasizing the supposed 'behind-the-scenes' organizers.

By contrast, liberal and progressive media presented largely sympathetic accounts of the protests. They documented problems in beef processing procedures in the U.S., the connections between the U.S. state (in the Bush White House and Congress) and the beef industry, the potential dangers of mad cow disease, and the political problems in the negotiation process between the Korean and U.S. government (Hankyoreh (2008, May 6); Kyunghyang (2008, May 14); Kyunghyang (2008, May 20)). While conservative newspapers argued that the beef-import agreement and KORUS FTA should be dealt with separately, liberal newspapers claimed that reopening of the beef market would lead to approval of KORUS FTA. As an alternative policy, these media suggested opening renegotiations with the U.S. to win concessions that would protect Korean beef producers and consumers. As the protests intensified, the focus of the liberal and progressive media changed to emphasize the government's reactions to the demands of the protesters and the violent suppression of the protests by the police.

We should emphasize that the ideological sway of the conservative media seemed to be genuinely threatened by these new protests. (Under past conservative regimes, conservative newspapers played a critical role in supporting and justifying the military dictatorships). Their logic was this: the dissenters against the regime were pro-North Korean, pro-communist and violent; therefore they created a serious social disorder and threatened the existence of the state. These discourses proved to be effective tools to criminalize and stigmatize protesters against the regime, effectively isolating progressive groups and helping to justify repressive policing activities (Shin, 2002). Yet ten years of liberal regimes (between February 1998 and February 2008) led to a weakening of conservative hegemony. The growth of civil society, thawing of relations between South and North Korea, and exposure of the corruption of conservative powers during the financial crisis of 1997 diminished the intellectual and moral leadership of conservative groups. In addition, the advance of democratic practices and development of information communication technology made it possible for people to join the ideological struggle against conservative hegemony in various ways.

Thus by the time of the beef protests, the media itself had become a key area of contestation in at least three different respects. First, the monopoly of information through government and traditional media (i.e. newspapers) was broken down by on-line networks. People were able to search for information about mad cow disease, download diplomatic documents of the U.S. to compare with government statements, and share their analyses on-line. People learned about mad cow disease through a process of self- and collective education, leading to more substantial understanding of the issues and enabling criticisms of the government. This process extended beyond the beef issue and delved into such issues as privatization, Grand Canal construction, and tax policies.

Second, one-sided reporting about the protests by traditional media failed to still the resistance. Indeed the very representation of the protests became a central object of contestation. In the past, newspaper photos rarely showed the brutal suppression of protesters by police, while firebombs thrown at the police invariably appeared on the front pages of newspapers. Live broadcasting by individuals – posting photos from digital and cell phone cameras on the Internet – arguably reduced the distortions of the traditional media. The violent suppression of protesters broadcasted by individual media contributed to the spread of protest. Debates among the protesters about the principle of non-violence became mixed with the conservative groups' argument that the protests were illegal. Though most people recognized the

importance of non-violence,⁵ police brutality and an emphasis on the illegality and violence of the protesters by conservative civic groups and media put the issue at the center of the protest.

Third, media ownership and reform itself became an object of contestation in the beef protests. Media civic groups have criticized family ownership of conservative newspapers like *Chosun*, *Joon-gang* and *Donga* and the lack of investigation into their finances and taxes. However, during the liberal regimes, conservative groups blamed two public broadcasting companies, Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), for biased broadcasting in favor of government. Thus the demand for 'media reform' carries multiple contested meanings.

During the early period of the protests, contradictory information about the issue and a disparaging tone toward the protesters from conservative media was the main point of media reform. Consider the 6 May 2008 editorial in *Chosun* titled, "Politicians should not be involved in the fake disturbance around mad cow disease", contrasting with the editorial from the same newspaper under the liberal regime (2001, February 7): "[Government] must let people know the danger of mad cow disease". In the latter, the editors criticized the liberal regime's insensitivity about mad cow disease, but they changed their attitude when Lee's conservative regime came to power and blamed the concern about mad cow disease on a 'spooky story'. One interview with the protesters said, "Under the Roh regime, these conservative newspapers raised questions about mad cow disease but completely changed their tone under the new government. If the press were functioning normally, hundreds of thousand people would not protest like they are today" (Kyunghyang (2008, June 11)). In addition, the prejudiced reports about the violence from these papers exposed these contradictions. While they continuously brought the violence of the protests into relief, they remained silent about violent activities of conservatives. Anger about these lapses led to direct actions during the protests: piling garbage in front of the newspapers' front doors; throwing eggs at media office buildings; denying interviews with journalists from these newspapers; and boycotting these newspapers along with companies that advertise in them. These practices reflect an implicit recognition of the importance of ideological struggle.

In addition, this awareness led to movements to protect public broadcasting companies such as KBS, MBC and YTN against government's control. The Yonhap Television News (or YTN), Korea's 24-h news channel, became a central issue. When Koo Bon-Hong, a friend of President Lee was designated the head of YTN, union members protested because they saw that this change could damage the independence of media. People in the beef protests supported YTN union members in these struggles to stop the government's control over the public media. In addition, popular support for the progressive newspapers like *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang* became another site for ideological struggle. In contrast to the conservative media, these two papers reported the imports of American beef more critically, noting the government's incompetence in the negotiations and America's problems with mad cow disease as underlying reasons for the beef-import agreement. People campaigned for increased subscriptions for these newspapers since they wanted to help protect these newspapers from low profitability. Some even sent food to the journalists to encourage and thank them for good reporting. The protests against the conservative papers (and support for the progressive media), like the efforts made to maintain the non-violence of protestors, reveal that the protesters put great emphasis on winning moral and intellectual leadership (Gramsci, 1971).

The ideological fervor of the protesters was taken as a genuine threat to the government's authority. Conservative newspapers reacted by attacking "MBC PD Note" which had reported the danger of the U.S. beef, recognizing it as stimulus for the protests. From May to December in 2008, the number of editorials directly related to

"MBC PD Note" was 17 in *Chosun*, 14 in *Donga*, and 7 in *Joongang*. Mad cow disease became the first point of attack. After the conservatives had weakened the arguments against U.S. beef, the focus changed into the protests themselves. From May 25, when protesters marched upon the presidential Blue House to speak to the President, the government and conservative media defined the protesters' street marching and anti-government slogan as illegal dissent (Kyunghyang Newspaper, 2008). This distinction also appears in S.B. Kim (2008). He distinguishes the early period of the protests as a festival and the later as violent street protests. This designation became the basis for the harsh repression against the protesters and functioned to weaken the moral authority of the protesters. The legal suppression of on-line activities which promoted the boycott against the conservative press and tracking of on-line users who spread the "spooky story" about mad cow disease were attempts by government to weaken the ideological spirit. Even after the beef protests stopped, conservative newspapers continued to reinterpret the beef protests as based on fiction, thus supporting the government's reform of legal and institutional tools for media and the Internet. The government moved quickly, replacing the presidents of broadcasting companies with pro-government persons and revising the laws about media and demonstrations to control public opinion and prevent another beef protest.

The protests

Political geographers have examined urban protests to gain insights into the political and spatial dynamics of social movements in Asia (Glassman, 2001; Salmenkari, 2009; Wong & Wainwright, 2009). In concert with this literature, we analyze the involvement and subjectivity of protest participants and two interwoven arenas of protest: urban spaces and on-line networks.

The protesters: who are they and how did they organize themselves?

The composition of the protesters and their organizing methods differed from all previous protests in Korea. In conventional protests of recent decades, the main participants were university students, laborers, and farmers. The gender composition was pre dominantly male, and the range of age was between the 20s and 40s. The physical composition of the protesters was implicitly related to the militancy and strenuousness of the protests. Thousands of men would wear masks to hide their identity from police cameras and carry steel sticks and firebombs to fight against the police. Demonstration often resembled small battles, a masculine space *in extremis*. The government could easily represent the protesters as violent and dangerous. Activist mobilization typically depended on a systematic hierarchy. For instance, the Korean Federation of University Students Councils (*Hanchongryun*), the representative university students' organization, was composed of the presidents of college-level councils from most Korean universities. Although the weakening of student movements and tensions among political factions has undermined these hierarchies and decreased their scale, this style of organization has been the typical form for activist organizations such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and Korean Peasants League. Using their strong hierarchical structures, these groups organized their members for protests and mobilized people in the streets.

In contrast, the beef protests were distinguished by the predominance of women and teenagers. The 'candle girl' character (Fig. 2) articulates these two aspects. This symbol reflected not only the surprising number of women and teenage participants but also the launch of the protests by teenage girls who gathered for the first candlelight demonstration on 2 May 2008 (K.Y. Choi, 2008; S.H. Kim, 2008). In this first protest, some complained about the government's



Fig. 2. The symbol of candlelight protests. Source: <http://cafe.daum.net/candlegirls>.

educational reforms, and some members of fan clubs of famous entertainers were concerned that American beef could harm their idols. Also, existing uneasiness about the safety of school meals aggravated anxiety about American beef. Teenagers accurately assessed that cheap American beef would be cooked for their school meals (K.Y. Choi, 2008: 8). One survey of teenagers who joined in the protests shows that anger about governmental policies was named as the primary reason to participate in the protest (56.1%). On the other hand, fear about mad cow disease occupies 14.0% (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2009). Teenage creativity gave rise to a now-famous expression, drawn on placards for the protests: "After I eat mad cow at school meals and die without any proper health care because of expensive private health insurance, please throw my ashes into Grand Canal" (Kang, 2008).

The initiation of the protests by teenagers had three significant consequences: it induced the participation of their parents' generation; it attracted the public's attention; and it slowed the government's response. The government could not forcibly suppress them and this endowed the protests with morality and sustenance (R.G. Park, 2008: 102). The emergence of teenagers in the protests changed the traditional picture of the demonstration. Instead of orderly slogans and traditional campaign songs, teenagers sang pop songs and danced to hip-hop. No strict form or order dominated the protests, but rather unpredictable and indeterminate activities. In one place, a band organized a street concert; in another, people created space for speeches about Korea's social problems (T.G. Lee, 2008); and so on.

In another shift from conventional practices, women in their 20s and 30s and housewives with their children were major participants in the protests. Joining with their family members or with members of on-line communities, they gathered together and expressed their own way of demonstrating. For instance, members of an on-line club about fashion, *Soul Dresser*, gathered money to advertise their opinion about beef imports in progressive newspapers like *Hankyoreh*; they sent watermelons to the journalists of these newspapers; and they performed a flash mob protest in COEX, the most populated shopping mall in Seoul. K.Y. Choi (2008) argues

that the femininity of the protests shows the broad front of opposition to neoliberal globalization. Choi may be right; as the protests continued, participants became more diverse by age, vocation, and gender. The biggest demonstration on June 10 was described as “from six or seven-year-old children to gray-haired old men, from farmers to professors, the candlelight parade has overcome generation and class showing that ‘direct democracy’ has surpassed just ‘resistance’” (Kyunghyang (2008, June 11)).⁶ In this context, the beef protests are often called the second ‘Great June Uprising’ in reference to the massive pro-democratic protests of June 1987. While we accept that the 2008 beef protests responded to undemocratic state practices which makes it possible to connect 1987 and 2008, these epochal events differ in several aspects. While some scholars (Hong, 2009; S.I. Park, 2008) praise the beef protests for acquiring ‘an open square’ for direct democracy; others reduce this new phenomenon to the debate around Korea’s political system, arguing that this form of direct democracy cannot run the country, thus an improved representative democratic form would be a better alternative (J.J. Choi, 2008). Y.K. Park (2008) criticizes the view of the beef protests as a historical extension of the Great June Uprising because it mystifies democracy and confines people’s anti-institutional struggle into an institutional framework of party-formal democracy. Regardless of the details of this debate, however, these new ideas and their agendas reveal more critical and deeper demands against current hegemonic conditions.

Two spheres of protest: in the street and on-line

Street demonstrations have been the typical form of protest in Korea since the 1980s. They display the militancy of the protesters and disseminate their ideas – usually labor-related and anti-government or anti-USA – to the public. Even when freedom of association was seriously restricted, street demonstrations were the most influential way to challenge suppressive regimes.

More recently, the spread of Internet networks and expansion of Internet use has radically transformed the way people protest. The first candlelight demonstration against the import of American beef was held by an Internet club named “People’s movement to impeach President Lee Myung-bak” (Kyunghyang Newspaper, 2008). Around ten thousand people joined in this first protest. Most of them did not belong to any formal organization, but they found information about the demonstration through the Internet.

In our view, the Internet played three crucial roles in the beef protests. First, on-line space can be compared to a rear base for the street protests. Lively and free opinion exchange through the Internet provided creative ideas for the street protests. For example, a user in an on-line discussion space called ‘Daum Agora’ suggested that protesters wear the uniform of the army reserve forces. This group aimed to reduce the violence in the protests. It protected people from violent suppression by police and even saved the police from some infuriated people. An on-line member called “bachelor girl” proposed to organize a “Gimbap (Korean sushi) squad”. Its role was to supply gimbap, bottled water, and chocolate bars to people in the protests. The club she belonged to gathered money for this project and offered these foods free to people at the protests. Additionally, various affinity groups like ‘medical team’, ‘stroller squad’, or ‘high heels squad’ were proposed on-line and emerged in the streets. These groups had rarely participated in conventional protests where highly organized labor union members and university students were dominant. They spent their own money to support food to protesters and created their own roles and functions. On-line fora like Daum Agora also created a space to review and criticize the street protests. In Daum Agora, people debated whether to march onto the presidential Blue House and whether to use counter-violence against police. These debates played a critical role

by empowering people to be active agents in the protests not just passive participants. The discussions allowed construction of consensus about principles underlying the protests like non-violence. People who gathered in Agora published a book to describe how they joined in and developed the candlelight demonstrations. This book, titled ‘Korea Common Sense Dictionary: Agora’, defines itself five ways: 1) as a new public square in the digital era, more correctly in the web 2.0 era; 2) as a new model of participatory democracy to overcome the limitations of representative democracy; 3) as a new window to reality newly opened by breaking down the wall between on-line and off-line and between analog and digital; 4) as things Agora hates: instruction, intervention, guidance and things Agora likes: solidarity, wisdom, debate; 5) as an unpredictable, living thing (Agorian, 2008: 62). Furthermore, the Internet facilitated the spread of information about the protests rapidly and easily. Rather than depending upon the formal hierarchical structure of groups such as labor unions or student unions, uploading and delivering messages from one Internet site to another became the main means of organizing the protests. Anyone could easily gather information – even from websites of amateur baseball clubs and cooking communities.

Second, Internet space itself became an arena of protest. On 6 April 2008, one high school student (whose on-line name was ‘Andante’) suggested an on-line subscription campaign for impeachment of the President on Daum Agora. Even though he proposed this idea in protest of the government’s education policy, it spread after the beef issue broke out, and 1.3 million people signed up. Another new protest method consisted of on-line attacks upon specific websites like the Blue House or the National police department. On-line users expressed their criticisms and protestations on homepages of governing politicians, websites of National police agencies, and conservative newspapers websites. On June 10, a speaker suggested that people log on *en masse* to the website of the Blue House to overwhelm the server. They responded in droves and shut it down – an act that exemplifies the interconnections between the street protests and on-line space.

Third, live broadcasting of the protests played a critical role in mediating between the street and on-line space. In June 2006, two Korean telecommunication companies KT and SK Telecom initiated WiBro (Wireless Broadband) service for the first time in the world. This new technology enabled individuals to broadcast the protests live, from the streets. Internet news-sites like Ohmynews, Color TV, Nocut news, 615 TV, and Pressian broadcast the protests using this service. Individuals using camcorders and WiBro service, also broadcast to websites such as Afreeca or Daum TV pot. Between May 22 and June 10 when the protests reached their climax, the number of Internet live broadcasts totaled 17,222 with no less than 7.75 million on-line users (Lee & Bae, 2008). This mediation between the street and on-line space enabled people to watch the protests through the Internet and encouraged them to join. On May 31 when the police violently suppressed the protesters, on-line users announced that they could not look on anymore and would join in the protests immediately (website of MLB Park). According to Lee and Bae (2008), around 1.5 million people watched Internet live broadcasting of the protest on that day. They argue that the WiBro service made a great contribution to the spread of the protests. In an interview, one of the live broadcasters (Afreeca Broadcasting Jockey, Ryu Sin) explained the distinctiveness of Internet-based live broadcasting:

Main broadcasting and newspapers deliver restrictive and sorted content by editing and arrangement [...]. But we broadcast the situation as it is from the beginning to the end. The real view tends to be quite different from what we can see through [mainstream] media. So if anyone asks me about the protest, I tell him or her to go and see [it] directly (Mediatoday (2008, June 11)).

In sum, two main strands of resistance – on-line and in the streets – were interwoven through the protests. Interactions between these two fora facilitated creativity and strengthened the effectiveness of the demonstrations.

How was space socially produced and contested in the protests?

The contestation of neoliberalism is sociospatial; space is simultaneously an object of contestation and part and parcel of political strategy (Leitner, Sheppard, Sziarto, & Maringanti, 2007: 19).

The existing literature on the candlelight protests pays little attention to their spatial aspects, yet their spatiality was fundamental to their achievements. Here we discuss three spatial aspects of the protest.

First, the main spaces of these protests were Cheonggye Plaza and Seoul Plaza, central spaces of the capital city. Although protests were held nationwide, they were concentrated in Seoul (and live Internet broadcasting of the Seoul protests reinforced its symbolic status as the central place for protest in Korea). While candlelight demonstrations were held in Cheonggye Plaza between May 2 and 28, the site shifted to Seoul Square after May 29 because of the increased number of protesters (K.I. Kim, 2009). Cheonggye Plaza has special meaning to President Lee Myung-bak. It is the central place for Cheonggyecheon, a reconstructed stream that flows across the inner city of Seoul. It was restored by President Lee when he was Seoul City mayor. It is widely agreed to be his most successful achievement, the one that launched his bid to win the presidency (Kim, 2006). The fact that the first candlelight demonstrations were held here therefore suggests two things. First, this is one of the new attractions in downtown Seoul, so a protest there can attract the attention of many people including foreigners. Second, it also implies a defiance of President Lee in his place. Consider the following speech from President Lee: “My heart ached when I saw even young students come out to stage candlelight vigils at Cheonggye Plaza, which I worked with all my heart, mind and soul to restore” (M.-B. Lee, 2008). K.I. Kim (2009: 80) argues, “The historical significance of Cheonggye Plaza is now changed from the symbol of Lee Myung-bak’s remarkable achievements into a symbol of resistance”.

Seoul Plaza is located in front of Seoul City Hall and stands at the center of Seoul. However, beyond this centrality, it is known as a place for democratic action after the ‘Great June Uprising’ in 1987, and during the 2002 World Cup games, thousands of people gathered to cheer South Korea’s team. Thereafter, Seoul Plaza became the place for people’s gathering for diverse ceremonies and events, and therefore city government created this space as a lawn for the public. People tend to understand this space as an essentially public place. They see it as a space where their sovereignty is realized. Along with Cheonggye Plaza, Seoul Plaza became an area for cultural festivals and free debates during the more than one hundred days of candlelight protest. People freely expressed their opinions about government’s policies, and they gave and enjoyed cultural performances. The fact that the demonstrations were held in this square associated the beef protests with the “Great June Uprising”. Spatially, thus, the two plazas established the protests on sites for democracy; they also symbolically challenged the President.

Secondly, we should ask: where demonstrators marched, what was the relationship between their destination and the reason for protests? If we follow the views of some U.S. reporters who interpreted the protests in strictly nationalistic terms,⁷ we would expect the U.S. Embassy to be one of the protesters’ main targets. The Embassy has traditionally been an important target for nationalistic social groups since it symbolically embodies U.S. power in Korea. Yet in this protest, the people’s destination was *not* the U.S. Embassy. This suggests that a nationalist interpretation of the

protests is mistaken. The main targets were sites associated with conservative hegemony like the Presidential Blue House, conservative newspaper companies, and public broadcasting companies like KBS, MBC, and YTN.

On May 24, people left Cheonggye Plaza and marched toward the Blue House.⁸ It was the first street march after twenty days of demonstrations in the plazas. The spatial concentration of conservative powers in downtown, coupled with the spatial proximity between the public plaza and sites associated with conservative hegemony, shaped the variegated aspects of the demonstration. The Blue House, Cheonggye Plaza, and Seoul Plaza form the central North–South axis in downtown Seoul. In addition, the buildings of two conservative media houses – Donga Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo – lie along the route to the Presidential Blue House. This spatial arrangement means that whether the demonstration was held in Cheonggye or in Seoul Plaza, the march toward the Blue House had to pass these two conservative media companies. Since people were already aggravated with the conservative’s prejudiced news about the protests, the spatial proximity of their buildings contributed to the demonstrations against these media houses and the evolution of the protests into the media reform movements of June.

And why did people march toward Blue House? The protesters made clear that they wanted to speak with the President (Han, 2008). This implies that people recognized the President as central to the problems of not only beef import but also comprehensive neoliberal policies. They understood that these issues could only be solved through the pressure against the President who holds supreme power. Both the President and the conservative media – the targets of the protesters – form part of the core of conservative hegemonic groups. Thus, the protests’ very spatiality symbolizes the challenge against the conservative powers.

The spatial contestation also manifested itself in support of public media. On June 13, around 1900 members of the Korean Defoliant Comrade Club (KDCC) – a conservative group consisting of victims from the defoliant used in the Vietnam War that raises ultra-conservative voices about social issues – attempted to enter the KBS and MBC buildings armed with iron bars and a liquefied petroleum gas tank to “stop... prejudiced broadcasting” (Kyunghyang (2008, June 14)). Just as beef protesters criticized the biased news from conservative media, conservative groups such as the KDCC expressed discontent about two of the public media (particularly MBC, which aired the initial report about American beef). No sooner did protesters hear this news than those in Seoul Plaza marched across Mapo Bridge over the Han River to confront the KDCC. Again, not only did people pay attention to the boycott against the conservative media, but they also grasped the significance of securing moral and intellectual leadership of the ideological struggles.

Third, the spatiality of the beef protests can be distinguished from past protests. Traditionally, spatial contention demonstrated the tenacity of the protesters. There was no legal space to speak out. Accordingly, street demonstrations were used to show opposition to government. A typical scene from these protests was the formation of a clear battle line between the protesters and police, followed by throwing stones, firebombs or tear bombs and physical conflicts: an open struggle over space between the protesters to go toward their target and the police to stop them. Nevertheless, targeting inaccessible places like the U.S. Embassy or the National Assembly implies that reaching the site was not the real purpose. The protesters actually pursued a display of power in challenging the government through these spatial struggles. The usual demonstration practices, therefore, manifest a linear use of space: gathering, marching, conflict, and breakup.

The new geography of protest facilitated a transformation of these traditional protest practices. People could use the Internet to disseminate their opinions and demonstrate in a variety of ways

like the boycott movements. Most people involved were not members of political organizations. No leader was guiding people's behaviors and directing a pre-determined plan. Some engaged in physical struggle against the police who blocked their way; others found another path to get to the target. While the use of space in conventional protests tended to be fixed and pre-planned, the candlelight protests were flexible, sporadic, and unpredictable. This relatively novel spatial form contributes to a conception of the protesters as a "multitude" of free subjects with an open use of space (Cho, 2008).

This new spatiality of the protesters created considerable confusion, not only for the police but also for the social movement groups. The fragmented form of the leadership caused disorientation to the government and even the social activists were shocked by this new situation: "The Lee Myung-bak regime, institutional politics, conservative media, and even the social movement groups lost hegemony in the square of the candle" (S.I. Park, 2008: 95). Upset by a new landscape of protests, the government could not react astutely. It was after the protesters advanced to the street on May 25 that the police harshly suppressed the protesters and arrested scores. Along with these physical attacks, government mobilized two spatial strategies in response to the amorphousness of protesters. First, they used spatial means to block the protesters. They cut off the main roads toward Blue House (even the main road in downtown Seoul, *Sejong-ro*) with police buses and large shipping containers (Fig. 3), and they enclosed the two public plazas with police buses (Fig. 4). A barricade of shipping containers, constructed to block *Sejong-ro*, was jeered by protesters with the

words: 'Here is the national border line of the State of South Korea in the U.S.A.'. While these measures were intended to physically exclude the protesters, it also had two interrelated symbolical impacts. On the one hand, to close off the plaza meant to prevent people from a public space and to leave it empty: a loss of the *raison d'être* of the public plaza! On the other hand, this also isolated the President's Blue House. Not only did this reinforce Lee's image out being of touch, but these extreme measures exposed the government's fear of the massive protests.

In a second strategic spatial move, ultra-conservative civic groups pre-occupied the main public square with the support of government. The Headquarters Intelligence Detachment (HID), an independent organization for retired Special Forces soldiers who engaged in espionage missions in North Korea in the past, pre-appropriated Seoul Plaza between June 5 and 6 and displayed the mortuary tablets of the dead members in a memorial ceremony (Fig. 5). While this event had been scheduled to be held in another place, after a breakfast meeting between the President and some HID members the site was changed to Seoul Plaza (Yeonhap (2008, June 6)). This spatial strategy not only tied up a massive urban space but also forced a collision between conservative and progressive groups. Conservative media characterized the protests as ideological conflicts between left and right wings instead of demonstrations against the government.

As police suppression intensified, spatial conflict shifted to securing space for protest and also on militant activism, as in the past. As licit demonstration spaces became increasingly occupied by the police and conservative civic groups, protestors were left



Fig. 3. The blockade of the road toward the Blue House using police buses and shipping containers. Source: Nam, S. Y. (<http://www.ohmynews.com>).



Fig. 4. The blockade of Seoul Square with police buses. Source: Kwon, W. S. (<http://www.ohmynews.com>).

with no choice but to attempt to secure space for protest. However, the clashes were not formed in a single and clear line as in the past. Instead, numerous distinct lines were demarcated between the police and people. Park accounts for this change using the metaphor of the transformation of a plane into a line: “where no space is permitted for a protest, it has no choice but to be transfigured [into] a line of intense antagonism” (Y.K. Park, 2008: 53). This is

a key to interpreting the spatial dynamics of the protests. While the protesters used space in flexible and dispersed ways, the opposing forces, i.e. the state’s agents and the police, also shaped the spatiality of the protests. The police indiscriminately suppressed not only the protesters but also citizens, journalists, and even National Assembly members from opposition parties, contributing to fears of arrest and driving many away from the protests.

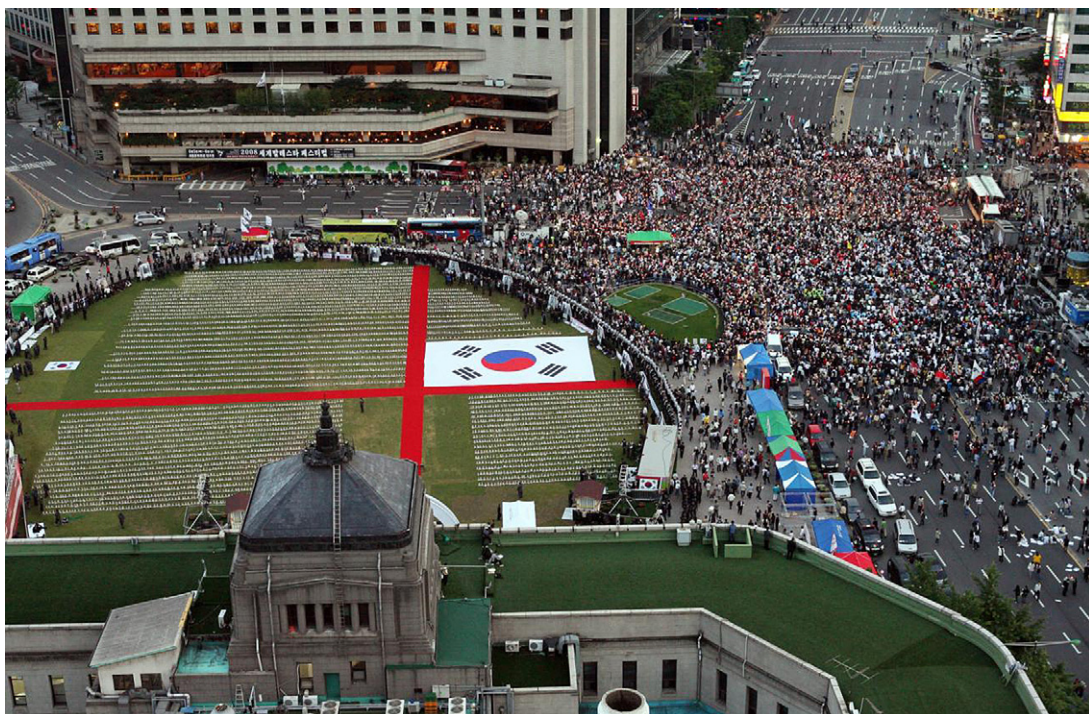


Fig. 5. The memorial service by the Headquarters Intelligence Detachment preoccupies Seoul Square. Source: Nam, S. Y. (<http://www.ohmynews.com>).

Conclusion

The effects of particular contestations of neoliberalism are difficult to predict... They may not result in policy change but may create new knowledge and awareness. Nevertheless, the cumulative implications for neoliberalism of such articulations, including complex interactions among different contestations, cannot be extrapolated from short-term assessments (Leitner, Sheppard, et al., 2007: 22).

When the conservative Grand National Party won landslide victories in both the presidential election in December 2007 and the election for National Assembly in April 2008, no one could imagine huge protests all the following summer. The millions of candles that shone those summer nights illuminated an upheaval of the existing political topography. The protests challenged not only the conservative hegemony but also the leadership of traditional social movement groups. The unprecedented focus on the media and fierce ideological struggles weakened the capacity of conservatives to dominate public opinion. In response, the government forbade people to use the central plaza for political purposes. The prohibition of nighttime demonstrations reveals the state's fear of candlelight. Faced by persistent protests, the government intensified its authoritarian practices: new legal mechanisms to control media and the Internet, harsh repression of people's rights for gathering and expressing opinions, domination of legislative and judiciary power by the executive, and so on. How should we conceptualize this response?

To answer this question we turn to Gramsci's conception of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), albeit via Giovanni Arrighi. In one of his last studies, Arrighi argues:

Gramsci's notion of hegemony may be said to consist of the 'power inflation' that ensues from the capacity of dominant groups to present their rule as credibly serving not just their interests but those of subordinate groups as well. When such credibility is lacking or wanes, hegemony deflates into sheer domination, that is, into what Ranajit Guha has called 'dominance without hegemony' (2007: 149–150).

To restate our argument in Arrighi's terms, the 2008 candlelight protests could be seen as both a provocation in response to, but also a cause of, the Korean state's descent into 'dominance without hegemony'. Evidence for this interpretation can be gleaned from an analysis by a well-known conservative columnist, G. I. Ryu, published in *Chosun* newspaper:

The state cannot be sustained only with compelling power. The state [must maintain] cultural hegemony along with compelling power. [The state must win] over middle and high schools, universities, theaters, bookstores, mass media, Internet space.... [I]t is not enough to take over the administrative and legislative bodies (*Chosun* (2008, June 9)).

Similarly, Shin (2009) describes the situation after the candlelit demonstrations as an 'organic crisis' in Gramsci's terms. That is, the state's standing as representation of the people is not accepted by the masses, signaling the weakness of the prevailing hegemony. Reflecting upon the low rates of popular support for the present government and the persistence of the candlelight protests, it would seem that Korea's political topography was fundamentally challenged by the 2008 protests which sapped government of its legitimacy. Yet the regime persists, via domination without hegemony. These situations remind many of the dictatorship of the 1960s and the 1980s. However, we interpret the present configuration as a mixture of the path-dependent nature of the developmental state with a neoliberal accumulation strategy.

Under these circumstances, many who cheered at the massive protests and their transformative potential are today disheartened. After all, the Lee government survived. A palpable disappointment spread among Korea's disparate progressive groups in the face of people's incapacity to overcome the counterattack of the conservative regime. And inevitably, the protests shed light on the limitations of the existing social movement groups. Yet this should not lead us to underestimate the achievements of the candlelight protests. The protests checked the state's most extreme neoliberal strategies, transformed Seoul's urban spaces, and broached new forms of political subjectivity. More concretely, on 19 June 2008, the president announced that he would not pursue several neoliberal projects such as the Grand Canal construction and privatization of some public companies. (However, these projects have since been re-introduced under new titles: *Sunjin*hwa as privatization and the 'Four Major Rivers Restoration project' for the 'Grand Canal project'.)

Taken together, these points suggest that the candlelight demonstrations successfully checked conservative hegemony and facilitated a growth in people's critical consciousness (K.I. Kim, 2009; Sohn, 2009). The popular memory of millions of candles cannot be extinguished quickly. The solidarity of new social groups, forged in resistance – on-line clubs, the temporary workers' union, and more – may lay the foundation for a different hegemony.

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Endnotes

¹ *The New York Times* (2003, December 25) "Mad cow disease in the United States."; *New York Times* (2008, April 19) "South Korea will lift its ban on American beef"; *Yeonhap* (2008, April 20) "The outcomes and achievements of Korea–U.S. summit meeting."

² On 15 June 2008, the agenda of the protests extended into six issues: Grand Canal construction, privatization of public companies, water privatization, educational autonomy, protection of public broadcasting, along with the import of American beef.

³ Kang (2008: 78) notes that while the policies of Lee Myung-bak government are indeed neoliberal, that does not mean the masses recognize them as such. By contrast, S.I. Park (2008) contends that politicization of food in this beef protest means that neoliberal globalization reaches all the way to our dining table and therefore it reveals that the substance of neoliberalism emerges as politics of our daily life. Yet he acknowledges that people's understanding about neoliberalism is filtered through quarantine sovereignty and the principle of "sovereignty shall reside in people" and therefore it shows that people in the protest may not correctly grasp the relation between beef, KORUS FTA and neoliberal globalization.

⁴ In 2009, the producers of this program were prosecuted in the Seoul Central District Court for reporting the dangers of mad cow disease, charged with (a) defaming the reputation of former Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun and others and (b) disturbing the operations of beef importers by providing intentionally misleading information. On 20 January 2010 they received a not-guilty verdict against all charges (*Hankyoreh* (2010, January 21)).

⁵ It was recognized that violent protest could give cause for government to suppress the protesters (*Yeonhap* (2008, June 3)).

⁶ Of course, the protests did not 'overcome class' in the sense of abolishing class differences. We agree with those scholars who have criticized the candlelight protesters' insensitivity to class issues. (Consider: "The statement by E-Land union leader, 'Seeing that the issue about the temporary workers is buried by the candles, I am frustrated' was well known among progressive groups... Groups like temporary workers were also marginalized in the candlelight demonstrations" (*Sisain* (2009, April 27))).

⁷ *The Washington Post* (2008, June 14) stated, "No doubt the Korean reaction is irrational... the health fears are compounded by nationalism"; and *The New York Times* (2008, June 16) narrated "The beef demonstrations were the occasion not only for drumming up anti-Americanism in the name of public health but for some extreme expressions of nationalism."

⁸ The Presidential statement on 22 May 2008 that rejected calls to renegotiate the beef deal worsened public opinion and contributed to the march toward Blue House (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, 2008: 77).

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